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# John of the Cross's Mystical Poetics and The End of the Poem<sup>1</sup>



*Gloria Maité Hernández*

“Words mediate what word cannot express,  
the flesh reveals what bodily eyes cannot  
see.”

Francis Clooney  
*Seeing Through Texts*

In his essay “The End of the Poem,” the philosopher Giorgio Agamben examines not just the last verse where a poem formally ends, but the rationale of poetry itself. Taking as a point of departure Paul Valéry’s definition of poetry as “the prolonged hesitation between sound and sense,” Agamben identifies sound and sense respectively with the semantic and semiotic currents that traverse a poem as a linguistic unit. While tending towards each other, sound and sense can never coincide within a poetic structure, but their creative tension, their impossibility of union, produces the very substance of poetry. A verse, Agamben concludes, “is the being that dwells in the schism,” sustained by its own impossibility of fulfillment (110).

Such an inherent quality of poetry of existing in the tension between form and meaning is marked, according to Agamben, by the poetic

<sup>1</sup>Like the rest of the essays in this Critical Cluster, this was originally presented as a paper for the “The End of the Poem” panel at the 12th Biennial Conference of the Society for Renaissance and Baroque Hispanic Poetry in September of 2015. I am grateful to the organizer of the panel, Sonia Velazquez, to the conference organizers and participants, and to my fellow panelists for their valuable feedback.

device known as enjambment. Allowing an idea to progress from one verse into the next without a prosodic pause, the enjambment transcends the limits of meter. The reader, missing the syntactic gap, finds the completion of an idea in the next line. However, even though the enjambment allows for the sense to transcend the sound between verses or stanzas, it remains incomplete when it occurs in the last line of a poem, where no following verse is left for the reader to have recourse to. Confronting the impossibility of such enjambment, and with it of poetic closure, Agamben suggests two possible responses to the question of what happens when a poem ends. First, one should consider the “mystical marriage of sound and sense” (114); that is, the attainment of the goal of poetry beyond the body of the poem. Second, sound and sense may remain forever separated, as if in “a theological conspiracy against language” (114). Lastly, Agamben posits a third alternative: the tension between sound and sense, instead of ceasing, lingers on beyond the last line of the poem as if in an “endless falling” (115). Semiotics and semantics, in that case, neither unite nor remain apart, but persist in an elongated proximity without ever consummating their encounter.

This essay proposes a twofold endeavor. While using Agamben’s ideas as a lens through which to read the mystical poem *Cántico espiritual*, by the sixteenth-century Spanish poet and theologian John of the Cross, I deploy John of the Cross’s mystical poetics to reexamine Agamben’s thoughts about the function of enjambment and the end—or the many ends—of a poem. Even though Agamben maintains a strict philosophical-literary perspective, he also acknowledges the theological foundation of poetic language, the “unquestionable bond of speech and life” inherited by Western literature from Christian theology.<sup>2</sup> In examining what is meant theologically by the end of a poem, this essay reframes Agamben’s philosophical inquiry into the realm of theopoetics at which he points.<sup>3</sup>

The poem *Cántico espiritual*, originally entitled *Canciones entre el alma y el esposo*, is the first of John of the Cross’s three main poetic compositions, to which he added commentaries.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the

<sup>2</sup>Agamben hints at the connection between poetry and theology in “The End of the Poem,” and discusses it more directly in the essay “The Dictation of Poetry,” from the same collection *The End of the Poem. Studies in Poetics*.

<sup>3</sup>I take the term “theopoetics” in its modern definition as “a discourse at the intersection of theology and literature,” encompassing both the metaphorical nature of the language used to talk about God, and the theological nature of poetic discourse (Keefe-Perry 206).

<sup>4</sup>The three poems are *Cántico espiritual*, *Noche oscura*, and *Llama de amor viva*. John of the Cross composed four theological commentaries, one for the *Cántico*, two for *Noche oscura* (*Subida al Monte Carmelo* and *Noche oscura*) and one for *Llama de amor viva*.

Biblical *Song of Songs* and influenced by the tradition of mystical theology, the *Cántico* recreates the metaphor of a female lover (*amada*) and her male lover (*amado*) to illustrate the soul's relationship with God. In the prologue of the commentaries to his own *Cántico*, John of the Cross describes the function of poetic language as a *rebosar*, an imperfect "overflowing" of divine mysteries that will never attain their complete expression within the boundaries of language:

*¿Quién podrá escribir lo que las almas amorosas, donde él mora, hace entender? Y ¿quién podrá manifestar con palabras lo que las hace sentir? Y ¿quién finalmente, lo que las hace desear? Ciertó, nadie lo puede; cierto, ni ellas mismas (las almas) por quien pasa lo pueden. Porque ésta es la causa porque con figuras, comparaciones y semejanzas, antes rebosan algo de lo que sienten y de la abundancia del espíritu vierten secretos misteriosos, que con razones las declaran. (10)*

Because who can write down what he makes those amorous souls in which he dwells understand? And who can manifest with words what he makes them feel? And who, finally, what he makes them desire? Certainly, no one can! Certainly! Not even they (the souls) to whom it happens can. And this why, with figures, comparisons, and resemblances, they let overflow something of which they feel, and from the abundance of the spirit, they pour out mysterious secrets, which with reasons they declare.<sup>5</sup>

In this declaration of a mystical poetics, John of the Cross grants to figures of speech, *figuras, comparaciones y semejanzas*, the function of bridging two distinct realms that can be largely identified with Agamben's notions of sense and sound. On the side of sense, John mentions the soul's understanding (*entender*), feeling (*sentir*), and desiring (*desear*). On the side of sound, he refers to the act of writing (*escribir*), or putting into words (*manifestar con palabras*) those "secret mysteries" acquired by the soul through the experience of sense. However, while the sound's scope of action is linguistic, the sense is anchored in a space and in a time other than those of the poem, "where the divine dwells." Figures of speech, accordingly, serve to reconcile divine sense with human sound.

The action by which poetic language bridges divine sense and human sound is that of overflowing (*rebosar*). The affects experienced in that other time and space overflow into the time and space of the poem. But John of the Cross's mystical poetics is not fulfilled in the outpouring because mystical metaphors not only connect divine sense to human sound, but also mobilize the reader's soul to reach that time and space apart from language where the divine was first

<sup>5</sup>All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

sensed. In Agamben's terms, mystical metaphors take speech back to the life that generated it. Accordingly, the effects of language are not to be harvested within the realm of language, but in that other realm of sense at which sound points.

Such a returning of sound to sense, which completes John of the Cross's mystical poetics, does not imply what Agamben identifies as "the mystical marriage of sound and sense" (114). Nor does it suggest an irresolvable separation between them. Rather, it signals a continuous approaching without ever reaching. This quality of intermittency has been noticed by scholars such as Michael Sells, who affirms that mystery is achieved in poetry through "referential openness" which can only be glimpsed—not permanently stared at—in the interstices of the text (8). Such instances of "referential openness," persistently challenging textual continuity, are marked by incomplete enjambments found not just in the last verse, but also in the middle or even the at beginning of a poem, as in the case of the *Cántico espiritual*.

The *Cántico* begins with an incomplete enjambment, as if the reader had arrived somehow late to the scene of love. But the reader could not have come any earlier because it is only when the divine disappears, taking away the sense, that the *amada* utters her first word and poetry begins:

*Adónde te escondiste, Amado,  
y me dejaste con gemido?  
Como el ciervo huiste,  
habiéndome herido;  
salí tras ti clamando, y eras ido. (1)*<sup>6</sup>

Where did you hide, lover,  
leaving me moaning?  
Like the stag you fled  
having wounded me;  
I went out, running after you, but you were gone.

As if John of the Cross wanted to start out with a disclaimer on the adequacy of sound to hold divine sense, the interrogative adverb *¿Adónde?* directs the reader's attention to that other space and time outside the textual body filled by the lover's presence. José Ángel

<sup>6</sup>Deeply rooted in orality, the *Cántico espiritual* has two written versions known as *Cántico A*, corresponding to a manuscript kept in the Carmelite convent in the town of Sanlúcar, and *Cántico B*, corresponding to the manuscript kept in the town of Jaén. In this essay, as in other works, I use *Cántico B*, in which the order of the verses is changed from the first version, and new stanzas are added.

Valente, referring to this stanza, affirms that the *Cántico* begins without a beginning because what the poem proclaims is the theory of beginnings without ends (401). Such a “beginning without ends,” characteristic of mystical poetry, is structurally marked by incomplete enjambments. ¿Adónde? functions at once as a response and as a question whose identical referent remains outside the text. It is, on one side, the *amada*’s response to her lover’s disappearance—an action that took place before the poem’s first word. On the other side, it is an inquiry into the lover’s location, which can only be answered by his actual return. Accordingly, the divine lover—in the theopoetic sense—is to be looked for not within words, but in those missing parts of the enjambment distinct from the textual body of the poem.

Along with the poetic function of signaling the location of sense beyond sound, the incomplete enjambment fulfills the theological role of hinting towards a promised life, where the encounter with the divine will not be impeded by linguistic or bodily boundaries. In his commentaries to the first stanza of *Cántico*, John of the Cross turns the *amada*’s question of location into the soul’s quest for essence: “It is as if she said: Word, my Husband, show me the place where you are hidden. And by this she asks him for the manifestation of his divine essence” (22). In identifying the notions of place and essence, John draws upon the Dionysian principle that the goal of mystical life is contemplating not God, whose perception is beyond “this life,” but his dwelling place.<sup>7</sup> When the *amada* finds the abode of her lover, she will dwell with God and perceive him “in between shadows,” *entreoscuramente*, as it is possible “here” (345). Different from a complete union, the indwelling of the soul with God is an ongoing act of becoming without ever completely uniting. The real purpose of the *amada*’s question, John declares, is to guarantee not the partial manifestation of God in this life, but the entire vision of his essence in the other, as in that space and time apart from the poem invoked by ¿Adónde?

It is important to remark that despite the distinction between sense and sound for the sake of analysis, neither the philosopher nor the mystic agrees on such a separation. Agamben notices that sense and sound do not appear in the poem as “two series of lines in a parallel flight.” Rather, the poem is only one line, “simultaneously traversed”

<sup>7</sup>John of the Cross uses the adverb *entreoscuramente*, “in between shadows,” in the commentaries to his poem *Llama de amor viva* to paraphrase Dionysius’s famous expression “as the ray of the shadows,” from the treatise *Mystical Theology*. Throughout his work, John uses the phrase “this life” or “here” to denote the limits of time, place, embodiment and language.

by the semantic and the semiotic current (114). The poem, Agamben continues, lives in the tension between these two currents continuously moving toward each other. The union of sense and sound, the ceasing of the word-generating tension, would bring the poem to a satiated silence. In a resonant theopoetic move, John of the Cross does not diminish the role of language in hosting divine presence. While making clear his awareness that figures of speech can just partially overflow the divine affects, he uses the language at his disposal for the sake of his readers. Even though something is lost in the translation from sense into sound, both Agamben and John of the Cross would agree that something else is gained when a poem does not end.

In the *Cántico*, the *amada* continues pursuing the lover through speech, even though the satisfaction of her desire would bring death to her voice and to the verses:

*Descubre tu presencia,  
y máteme tu vista y hermosura.  
Mira que la dolencia de amor, que no se cura  
sino con la presencia y la figura. (11)*

Uncover your presence,  
and let your sight and beauty kill me;  
know that the sickness  
of love is not cured,  
except by presence and the image.

The verb *descubrir*, literally “to discover,” is glossed by John in the commentaries as “show” or “manifest” your “affective presence.” Such an affective presence that the *amada* demands is compared to the direct vision of the divine claimed by Moses on Mount Sinai, where Moses asks the Lord to show his Glory, and the Lord warns him that “no one can see my face and live” (Exodus 33:13–20). As in the case of Moses, the palpable vision of the face of God would kill the *amada* and, with her, the poem. In the words of Agamben, it would fulfill “the time of poetry, destroying its two eons by hurling it into silence” (114). Thus, in the next stanza, the *amada* turns to a fountain, asking it to form in its silvery waters not the presence but the eyes of her lover, which are already drawn into her innermost self:

*Oh cristalina fuente,  
si en esos tus semblantes plateados  
formases de repente  
los ojos deseados  
que tengo en mis entrañas dibujados. (12)*

*¡Apártalos, Amado,  
Que voy de vuelo!  
Vuélvete, paloma,  
que el ciervo vulnerado  
por el otero asoma  
al aire de tu vuelo, y fresco toma.* (13)

O crystalline fountain,  
if in those silvery features  
you would suddenly form  
the desired eyes  
that I have drawn on my insides.  
Take them apart, Beloved!  
Lest I fly away.  
Come back, dove,  
so that the wounded stag  
comes up from the hills  
at the air of your flight, and takes its freshness.

The verses of the twelfth stanza draw an infinite series of referential openness that intensifies the opposition of sense and sound. There are three lines of vision: first, the eyes of the *amada* look at the fountain; second, the eyes of the divine also look at the fountain; and third, his eyes and her eyes meet through the water of the fountain. But the triangle traced among these three points is not a perfect figure. The three lines of vision never touch because his eyes are drawn on her innermost self. As she looks at the fountain, her lover looks back at her from inside herself, producing a phenomenon of infinite reflection, where her eyes and his eyes meet endlessly through the fountain's water without ever encountering. Mediated by the fountain, the two currents of vision, as the intensities of sense and sound, become infinitely extended.

In his commentaries on these verses, John of the Cross focuses precisely on the fountain, which he identifies with the first theological virtue, that of faith. While acknowledging that the theological faith, as the poetic fountain, mediates divine vision, John also stresses its insufficiency. As a crystal or a piece of glass does, the fountain-faith reflects God's eyes, but it does so "obscurely," as a mere reflection that cannot satisfy the *amada's* thirst for the divine presence. The purpose of the fountain, like that of faith, is at once to mediate and to obscure God's presence; in the words of Agamben, to slow and delay the advent of the Messiah (114).

Therefore, it is not within the fountain, but in the fleeing of sense between the twelfth and the thirteenth stanza, where the actual



encounter between the *amada's* eyes and the eyes of her lover is finally consummated. While the twelfth stanza ends in her entreating the lover to show his eyes, the thirteenth stanza starts with her begging him to turn his eyes away, saying "take them apart, Beloved!" Imitating the incomplete enjambment in the opening ¿Adónde?, the lovers' eyes have met outside the poetic body, in the silent transition between the stanzas. The only clue left for the reader to know that the *amada's* claim has been satisfied is her request for the lover to retrieve his eyes, so that she does not "fly away." John's commentary glosses this semantic rupture between the stanzas as the *amada's* rapture or ecstasy. When she encountered her lover's eyes, John explains, the *amada* "went out of herself" in a flight impeded by the lover's intervention in the third line: "Come back, dove." It is the calling of the divine that saves the *amada* and the poem. In obliging her by averting his sight, God prevents the union of divine sound with human sense, and the end of the poem.

The *Cántico* cannot properly be said to have an end. The second version of the poem closes with the following stanza:

*Que nadie lo miraba,  
Aminabad tampoco parecía,  
y el cerco sosegaba,  
y la caballería,  
a vista de las aguas descendía. (40)*

For nobody was looking,  
nor would Animabad appear,  
and the siege ceasing.  
and the cavalry descending at the sight of the waters.

In the commentaries to this last stanza, John of the Cross declares that the soul is letting her divine lover know that "he may now conclude this business," because she is ready to "ascend the desert of death, abundant in delight" (238). Having become so involved in an "intimate enjoyment" with her lover, the *amada* is not asking any longer for his whereabouts. She has now receded out of sight, and is moving quickly into a passage out of language. At this instant, when divine sense and human sound are about to merge, the image of the cavalry descending at the sight of waters evokes Agamben's idea of the "endless falling" as the final rationale of poetry: "The double intensity animating language does not die away in a final comprehension; instead it collapses into silence, so to speak, in an endless falling" (115). Rather than exhausting the tension between sense and sound,

the last verse of the *Cántico* urges one to read past the end of the poem, following this last incomplete enjambment into the continuous descent of the cavalry.

Giorgio Agamben and John of the Cross partially agree on the answer to what happens when a poem ends. The philosopher finds language affirming its capacity to “communicate itself” even after the poem has collapsed into silence. The mystic, less impelled by the lifespan of the poem, ends it almost imperceptibly. The *Cántico* could have ended with the incomplete enjambment of the first ¿Adónde? It could have never existed. One of the main distinctions between the philosopher and the mystic is precisely the role of the poet, who decides where a poem ends. Having brought both into conversation, this essay concludes differently from Agamben’s. Poetry should not be only philosophized, but also theologized.

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